

**Cultural, Ethnic Differences and Educational Achievement of African Heritage Students:
Towards Employing a Culturally Sensitive Curriculum in K-12 Classrooms: A Literature**

Review

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Abstract

For a long time, researchers have reported on the low academic performances of Black Americans in comparison to other minorities and non-minorities. During this time, there have been debates over the causes of the differences in education achievement between the various sub groups (i.e. ethnic subgroups) of students studied. The purpose of this review of literature paper (i.e. a combination of theoretical and research studies reviewed) is to discuss major reasons for the differences in education achievement levels between students of African heritage (i.e. African American students –involuntary immigrants to the USA and foreign born Afro –Caribbean and Africans who immigrated to the USA – voluntary immigrants), such as: cultural influences and levels of parental involvement. The study concludes with a call for the employment of more culturally sensitive curriculums to enhance the K-12 learning setting for ethnically diverse learners.

Key words: education achievement, African heritage students, dominant culture

{Literature review, 61 references}

For a long time, researchers such as Steele & Aronson (1995), Steele (1997, 1999), Kauchak & Eggen (2005) and Ogbu (2003) have focused on differences in educational achievement being attributed to low teachers' expectations and perceptions of some students, differences in students' learning styles and differences in students' ability levels, lack of certified teachers in some schools and unequal distribution of state, federal and local dollars between schools.

Numerous research investigating the achievement gap seen between White American and Black American students or between Black Americans, White Americans, and Asian students have been documented (Wang, 2004; Paik, 2004; Ferguson, 1998; Norman et al., 2001; Norman et al. 2006). Despite this wealth of knowledge obtained with regards to racial disparity in test scores between certain groups, little is known about what accounts for the educational achievement gap that seems to exist between students of the same Black race.

Studies perused suggested two major reasons for differences in achievement between African heritage students (Afro –Caribbean, African Americans & Africans), which are: cultural reasons and levels of parental involvement (see Gibson & Ogbu, 1991; Kauchak & Eggen, 2005; Ogbu & Simmons, 1998; Ogbu, 2003).

This paper, which is a review of theoretical studies (see Ogbu & Simmons, 1998; Boykin, 1986; Ogbu 2003), and research studies (see O'Bryan, 2006; Pomerantz, Moorman and Litwack, 2007; Jeynes, 2003) begins with a detailed account of the methodology employed in carrying out the review process. This section is followed by a discussion of the two major explanations for differences in educational achievement between Africans, Afro-Caribbean and African American students in the United States. I will then introduce a third possible explanation, which assesses the ethnic maturity stage(s) of individuals in order to determine their Ethnic Identity level or

Ethnic maturity level with regards to their ability to master two dissimilar cultures or their inability to master two dissimilar cultures. Bank's Typology of Ethnic Identity (as is presented in McAllister & Irvine, 2000) which consists of six stages of Ethnic Identities is used as a backdrop for assessing an individuals' ethnic identity stage or stages, which can denote a person's ability to master two different cultures or not. For individuals at stages 1 and 2 of Bank's Typology of Ethnic Identity are usually unwilling or unable to master two dissimilar cultures (e.g. African & European), so the individual clings to the culture he or she most identifies with and rejects the other culture, he or she less identifies with, and as a result he or she may develop an oppositional attitude to the rejected culture or to others who uphold the values of the rejected culture. On the other hand, individuals at stages 4, 5 and 6 (the more developed stage on Bank's continuum) of Bank's typology of ethnic identity are able to master two dissimilar cultures successfully (e.g. African & European), and so they can perform the skills and functions that will allow them to be successful in both cultural realms (the more dominant and least dominant cultures) (McAllister & Irvine, 2000). I then conclude with recommendations for the employment of a more culturally sensitive curriculum within the K-12 classroom in order to make for more effective learning amongst culturally and ethnically diverse students.

Method

This review paper discusses theoretical and research studies and both empirical and non-empirical sources were utilized as a part of the review process. The articles and books that were used represent a broad range of works spanning many fields, such as anthropology, sociology, psychology, education and education statistics. These works address school performances and ethnic / culturalized aspects of Black student achievement.

Education databases, SAGE Journals online and Questia Google Scholar were searched for the period 1970 – 2007. Abstracts and full text articles that discussed education achievement of minorities in general, school achievement of Blacks specifically, cultural / ethnic influences on school performance, Black students' attitudes toward schooling, culture of oppositionality literature, and parental involvement were selected for the review. Journals such as *Review of Educational Research*, *Educational Researcher*, *Anthropology and Education Quarterly*, *Journal of Research in Science Teaching*, *Journal of Negro Education*, *Science Education*, *American Sociological Review*, *International Journal of Educational Research*, *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, *The Urban Review*, *American Educational Research Journal*, among others, were searched for relevant works. Additionally, books such as *The Mis-Education of the Negro*, and *Black American Students in An affluent Suburb, A study of Academic Disengagement* were also used in the review process.

The search period was conducted from August 1, 2007, to November 20, 2007, and more than 100 abstracts, full articles, books and non-book sources were consulted. However, only those relevant articles and books were utilized in the actual paper.

Background details on the Education Achievement Differences between African Heritage Students

This section of the review begins with an outline of the origins of educational achievement differences between African heritage students which is grounded in (a) historical – racial arguments; and (b) linked to Blacks' voluntary versus involuntary immigration to the United States. Explaining the origins of the achievement differences between African heritage students provides the background and context for the rest of the work. The terms *involuntary*

immigrant and *voluntary immigrant* were coined by John Ogbu as a way of best accounting for academic differences between African, Afro-Caribbean and African American students.

Ogbu (2003) found that academic differences between African heritage students were linked to history of racism and oppression having been experienced by one immigrant group and not by the other immigrant group. Therefore, those individuals called involuntary immigrants are those immigrants who experienced secondary cultural differences and whose ancestors came to the United States in 1619 as slaves. They were treated as ‘second class’ citizens and as a result learned to build up resistance to the White Eurocentric school systems and it is believed that their school performance has suffered as a direct result (Ogbu, 2003). However, voluntary immigrants are believed to be immigrants who have not experienced the history of racism and oppression as the involuntary immigrants have. They in turn experience primary cultural differences and embrace opportunities in the United States and so succeed in the Eurocentric school system (Ogbu, 2003).

Moreover, what has become apparent within the last decade of American schooling is that the K-12 school systems fail to: (a) realize that racial differences may not be the single major determining factor affecting students’ science achievement or educational achievement levels, but rather, cultural and ethnic differences intertwined with critical factors such as social class and student oppositionality to the Eurocentric school system may all play a bigger role in students’ achievement (Banks, 1995; Bempechat & Severson, 1999; Ogbu, 2003; Wang, 2004; Paik, 2004); and (b) realize overall that there is a disparity gap in achievement between students of the same Black race or of the same African heritage (Summer & Fisher, 2005; Ogbu, 2003).

Cultural Factors and Differences in African Heritage Students' Educational Achievement

New waves of social critique came about during the 1960s and 1970s as a result of activists fighting against racism and racial injustices (Wiggan, 2007). Rather than focusing on racism or racial differences as being related to students' achievement levels, research started to view achievement as being related to students' social class and cultural differences (Wiggan, 2007). According to Wiggan (2007), although the class-and-culture perspective gave new directions to the school achievement discourse, and positively shifted the focus of differences in achievement between students from biology to sociology, it also posed some challenges as well.

However, there are those researchers who feel that the class-and- culture perspective has been given too much attention at the expense of ignoring other possible causes for student outcomes / achievement. Wiggan's (2007) argues that although student outcomes can be determined by students (and parents) social class standing and financial resources, this perspective alone can not only be viewed as a determining factor in student outcomes. Wiggan felt that school quality, teacher quality, and financial and material resources made available to schools can more so determine student outcomes (p. 316).

Similarly, the cultural mismatch between teachers and students is also looked at as a factor that impedes successful student outcomes for some Black students. Woodson (1933, as cited by Wiggan, p. 318) argued that Black students may feel alienated and under perform in schools because their own experiences have been ignored in the formal academic discourse in favor of the singular focus on the experiences and lived world views of the dominant group (p. 318).

Even within Black schools where there is no cultural mismatch between teachers and students, that is, where teachers and students are of the same race and culture, teachers still

convey hidden and overt messages of Black social deviance in an attempt to sway Black students into embracing White, middle class values, which they deem as more appropriate values (Tyson, 2003 as cited by Wiggan, p. 318).

Since the 1960s, it has been postulated that the low academic performance of Black Americans was caused by differences in and conflicts between Black culture and White American culture (Boykin, 1986; Gay, 1979; Hale-Benson, 1986; Hillard, Payton –Stewart, Williams, 1991; Irvine, 1991; Nobles, 1991; Pollard & Ajirotu, 2000; Williams, 1990). Among the studies mentioned beforehand, with few exceptions (Williams, 1990), the explanation based on cultural differences was derived from empirical study of culture, either in the Black or White communities.

Boykin (1986) argued that Black American students face a ‘triple quandary’ in the realm of culture and schooling. Boykin argued that Black Americans face three problems: (a) they have to deal with three cultural experiences, namely European culture, African culture, and African American culture (which is rooted in African culture); (b) cultural hegemony that arises from social, economic, and political oppression as minorities; and (c) their own self-contradictory socialization processes. In Boykin’s views, he felt that Black students’ problems in school came by way of them being compelled to master two incompatible cultures: Black American culture which is rooted in African cultures, and European American culture, which is the dominant culture of the slave master whom had enslaved their fore fathers years ago. Boykin (1986) further added that the problem Black students face is that they are asked to master both of these cultures that are sharply at odds with each other. To make matters worse, the public school system does not allow them to learn and perform in the Black culture that they are accustomed with.

However, other researchers, such as Ogbu (2003, 1994), and Ogbu & Simmons (1998) have challenged Boykin's position. They argue that although cultural differences do cause learning difficulties for black students and other minorities, it can not be seen as a permanent cause of the problem for some minorities; that is, some minorities eventually accommodate or adapt elements of the dominant culture that would help them to succeed and do well academically in school. For, despite differences in their native culture compared to American culture, Blacks from other countries coming to America still manage to succeed. In Ogbu's (2003) view, the relationship between African cultures and White American culture should be viewed as differences of two dissimilar cultures, in the same way, Asian, South and Central American cultures are dissimilar to American way of life.

Using an ethnographic research analysis, Ogbu (2003) argued that cultural – ecological theory effectively accounted for why members of a minority group do or do not do well in school. Cultural-ecological theory of minority schooling takes into account the historical, economic, social, and cultural aspects of the Black American minority groups in the larger society in which they exist. Cultural –ecological theory considers and compares the two ways of becoming minorities and their educational implications in the United States, namely, immigration and non-immigration (Ogbu, 2003). Additionally, descendants or later generations of voluntary minorities are voluntary minorities like their foreign born parents or grand parents. Thus, second, third, and fourth generation immigrants are also voluntary minorities. It does not matter that it was their forebears rather than themselves who decided to immigrate to the United States. The community forces that developed among their forebears continue to influence their educational ideas, attitudes, and behaviors (Ogbu, 2003). Furthermore, voluntary immigrants compared to involuntary immigrants have different beliefs about the instrumental value of school

credentials. Immigrant voluntary minorities believe more strongly that the way to get ahead or to achieve upward mobility or ‘the American dream’ is to get a good education and good credentials. To them, education is the key to success. They believe that education can help them succeed more in the U.S. than back home. On the other hand, non-immigrant minorities (involuntary immigrants) are unsure that education is the key to success. Many see little evidence among their own people for believing that success in adult life or upward social mobility is due to education (Ogbu, 2003; Burdman, 2003; Gibson & Ogbu, 1991).

Similarly, Black American students from lower social classes are believed to be predisposed to lower school performance because their cultural and linguistic codes differ from that of the dominant school system (Wiggan, 2007). According to the class-and-culture perspective, it is presumed that the potential for being a high achiever is passed down through students’ social class and culture, in each generation; however, some students inherit a class and culture that is antithetical to achievement (Wiggan, 2007). Black American students are believed to be that group of students that have inherited a class and culture that is antithetical or oppositional to achievement (Ogbu, 2003; McWhorter, 2001; Ogbu, 1988; Ogbu & Fordham, 1986).

Another cultural theoretical explanation for differences in school performances between Africans, Afro-Caribbean, and African American students discusses student alienation and oppositional identity (McWhorter, 2001; Ogbu, 1988; Ogbu & Fordham, 1986). According to Wiggan (2007), currently this theme generates the most ‘vitality’ in the literature. Further, proponents of the opposition identity perspective argue that Black American students are sanctioned by their peers and are accused of ‘acting White’ when they do well in school (Wiggan, 2007; Ford & Harris, 1996; Ogbu & Fordham, 1986). So to resist ‘acting White’ or

being labeled by their peers as ‘acting White,’ Black American students are compelled to not do well in school in order to maintain their ethnic identity and in order to remain a part of the ‘in group,’ rather than the ‘out group.’ As a result, some students underachieve purposely to avoid sanctioning by their peers (Wiggan, 2007). Some label and reject as ‘White’ certain pedagogical beliefs and behaviors that are conducive to making good grades. According to Ogbu (2003), some Black American students at Shaker High School accused other Blacks of ‘acting White’ because they behaved in ‘White ways,’ such as spoke standard English, enrolled in honors AP classes, hung around too many White students, or made good grades, even though the students accused of doing these things did not necessarily reject their Black identity.

According to Ogbu (2003), Black Americans often under performed due to ‘cultural expectations’ and he further argued that the Black students poor performances was regarded as ‘cool’ by other Blacks and meant that these Blacks were not trying to be White. From Ogbu’s study, it was found that Black students intentionally did poorly to be accepted by other Blacks and to avoid being labeled as ‘acting White.’ They somehow associated good performance to being White or acting White. Accordingly, in an interview with Pamela Burdman in 2003, Ogbu reported on the research findings of one of his graduate students at the University of California at Berkeley. Ogbu’s research associate research study investigated the ‘acting White’ theory; she collected about 17 different attitudes and behaviors that Black students did not want to have anything to do with because they were labeled as “White,” and one of the seventeen different attitudes and behaviors that Black students regarded as “White” was making good grades (Burdman, 2003). To the students involved in the research study conducted by Ogbu’s research associate, the major contributing factor they felt caused one to be labeled as ‘acting White’ was making good grades (Burdman, 2003). Further, Ogbu & Fordham (1986) suggested being

accused of ‘acting White’ impacted achievement. Peer pressure among Black American students was cited as the main reason for students rejecting doing well in school because they did not want their peers to view them as ‘un cool’ or ‘White,’ but rather, it was more accepted among Black American culture to be viewed as dumb or uninterested in school and school work. Ogbu (2003) cited a twelve grade Black American female student from Shaker High who said:

‘Some Black students believe it is cute to be dumb’ (p. 217).

This peer pressure to under perform was more prevalent among Blacks in middle and high schools than in elementary schools. Also, other immigrant groups did not have this same negative peer pressure to under perform, but rather the peer pressure seen with other ethnic groups was a positive one (Ogbu, 2003; Ogbu & Fordham, 1986).

Again, Ogbu & Fordham (1986) traced the roots of the ‘oppositional culture’ to institutionalized racism within American society, which they contended led Blacks to define academic achievement as the prerogative of Whites and so they invested themselves instead in alternative pursuits. Others, however, place the blame of acting white squarely on the shoulders of Blacks (Fryer, 2004). A critical opponent of the ‘institutionalized racism’ debate, John McWhorter, contrasts African American youth culture with that of immigrants including Blacks from the Caribbean and Africa who ‘haven’t sabotaged themselves through victimology’ (Fryer, 2004).

Even within course selection within high schools, the issue of White courses versus Black courses is apparent. For example, AP courses are labeled by some Black students as ‘white courses,’ whereas, college prep courses are labeled as ‘Black or colored courses.’ In Ogbu’s opinion, at every opportunity, some Black students exert the ‘low effort syndrome,’ in order to

get by and also to avoid being labeled by their counterparts as acting White (Ogbu, 2003; Gordon & Yeakey, 1980).

Similarly, other proponents of the ‘acting White’ debate have agreed with Ogbu’s stance on the matter, that some Black students potentially deliberately sabotage their academic career, which is seen as not a good way to reject what they perceive as the schools’ negative imposed Eurocentric attitudes and values on them. One proponent, Fryer (2004) argued that if minority students today deliberately underachieve in order to avoid social sanctions that by itself could explain why the academic performance of 17 year old African Americans, as mentioned by the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), has deteriorated since the 1980s, while the academic performance of African American 9 year olds has been improving. It may further help us to understand why there is a shortage of minority students in most elite colleges and universities (Fryer, 2004). Additionally, Fryer (2004) conducted a quantitative study in 2004 in which he measured students’ popularity amongst peers by way of surveys. Surveys were handed out to African Americans, Hispanics, and White participants in the study, and each participant was asked to list their closest male and female friends, up to five males and five female friends. Next, the surveys were examined to see the frequency of occurrences of some students’ names versus others and this was used as a marker or a sign of a student’s popularity amongst his or her peers. Students’ achievement level were determined by their GPA which was based on their cumulative self reported grades in English, mathematics, history / social studies and science. Fryer (2004) in comparing the popularity of high-and-low achieving students, compared students only with students who attended the same school, ensuring that the results were not skewed by unmeasured characteristics of specific schools. What Fryer found in his study was that at very low GPAs, there were little differences among ethnic groups seen in the relationship between

grades and popularity, and high –achieving Blacks were actually more popular within their ethnic group than high-achieving Whites were within theirs, but only up to the GPA level of 3.4; for at the GPA level of 3.5 clear differences in rate of popularity between Whites and Blacks became apparent. African Americans with GPAs as high as 3.5 continued to have more friends than those African Americans with extremely lower grade point averages, but their rate of increase in popularity was no longer as great as that seen amongst White students at the same GPA level. Also, as the GPAs of Black students increased beyond 3.5, they tended to have fewer and fewer friends. A Black student with a GPA of 4.0 had on average 1.5 fewer friends of the same ethnicity than a White student with the same GPA. Put differently, a Black student with straight As was not that popular among Black peers as White students with straight As were among their White peers. Although, Fryer (2004) agreed that African American students with very high GPAs (4.0 GPA) were not as popular among their peers as those with GPAs that were around 3.0 to 3.4, he also found that acting White was unique to those schools that were made up of less than 80 percent Blacks; whereas, in predominantly Black schools, there were no evidence that getting good grades affected students' popularity among peers.

Ogbu (2003, 1987) and Wiggan (2007) suggested that involuntary minorities, people whose forefathers were originally brought to the United States as slaves, develop an oppositional social identity to the oppression of the dominant group, which inhibits the way they view their education. Conversely, Ogbu proposed that voluntary immigrants, people who voluntarily migrated to the U.S. are free from the oppositional social identity, and tend to do well in school because their point of reference and the point of reference of their ancestors is the experiences from their home countries, not that of forced colonization, conquest or slavery. Wiggan (2007)

stated that for voluntary migrants to the U.S., life in the U.S. is viewed as being more hopeful and promising than life in their home countries.

Carter (2003) argued that he found that social and economic inequality yielded disparate outcomes for students of subordinate classes or racial and ethnic backgrounds because such inequalities undermined some groups' beliefs and expectations about their chances for academic success. Because intelligence and success in the United States is dependent upon individuals acquiring and utilizing 'dominant cultural capital' (i.e. high status cultural attributes, codes, signals, dress & talk/ speech/ linguistics), Blacks, particularly, Black Americans may consciously or subconsciously not acquire the available 'dominant cultural capital' available and may in turn utilize the 'non-dominant cultural capital' (i.e. a set of tastes, or schemes of appreciation and understanding accorded to lower status groups) in order to be a part of the in-group (Black) affiliation. Consequently, some Black American students may underachieve or not succeed in the USA because they are either denied access to the 'dominant cultural capital' or willingly do not embrace the 'dominant cultural capital' that can serve as their passport to upward social mobility and academic success.

Recent research contests the viability of oppositional culture theory, revealing that African American students of all socioeconomic backgrounds strongly adhere to dominant achievement ideology (Ainsworth-Darnell and Downey, 1998; Cook & Ludwig, 1998; Datnow & Cooper, 1997; Ferguson, 1998; Ford et al., 1994; O'Connor, 1997; Tyson, 1998). Carter (2003) argue that these students do not reject academic achievement, but rather resist the cultural default - that which is regarded as 'normal' or 'regular' – namely, White, middle-class standards of speech, dress, musical tastes and interactional styles. Further, the acquisition of non-dominant cultural capital does not always signify a rejection of commonly shared values in regards to

social, economic, or educational attainment. In fact, some individuals may employ dominant and non –dominant cultural capital, negotiating strategically between their community, family, peer, and school spaces (Carter, 2003). Some involuntary Black immigrants may utilize this process, but to a large extent, voluntary Black immigrants use this process in order to be successful in the United States. In support of this, Carter (2003) conducted a grounded theory research approach in which she collected data from a sample of forty-four low income African American youths, ages 13 to 20. Carter utilized semi-structured interviews over a ten month period (Nov. 1997 to August 1998) in Yonkers, New York, and what emerged were data revealing that to some extent African American students employ their ‘Black’ cultural capital to cultivate their African American peers’ acceptance of them as authentically Black; whereas, some study participants used dominant cultural capital for instrumental purposes to ‘buy’ either an academic or employment opportunity or perhaps even to influence a judge’s impression in a court of law (Carter, 2003). To support this statement, a young African American woman named Loresha who participated in Carter’s (2003) grounded theory research study stated accordingly:

“If I’m talking to my friend or father, like Yo, whasup, whatever? And when I call my job, I have a different attitude towards the whole situation, you know. I don’t talk with slang. I make sure everything is correct. But, I don’t know. Personally, I think ...for a Black person to act White.....like when he arrives (at home) I think he don’t have to do that. But like even if he’s in school, he can act like that in school. Maybe it’ll get him somewhere. You know? And when he goes outI don’t know.....don’t have to act like that. You can just be yourself. But there is going to be times in your life where you are going to have to put on a little act, or a little show to get the extra budge or whatever, you know” (Carter, 2003; p. 141).

Carter (2003) suggested that resistance to the achievement ideology was not unique to Blacks, but low income Whites also showed school resistance. Carter (2003) reported that low income white students in his research study had anti-achievement beliefs, whereas, many of the Black students were optimistic and had a strong belief in the achievement ideology. Similarly, Ainsworth – Darnell & Downey (1998) leveled strong criticisms at Ogbu's oppositional identity explanation. Ainsworth-Darnell & Downey (1998) leveled strong criticisms at Ogbu's oppositional culture explanation. Using data from the first follow up of the 1998 National Education Longitudinal Study, they focused on African Americans, Asians, and White students and found that many African American students were actually more optimistic about future employment than White students. Moreover, they perceived education as the determining factor in obtaining these jobs, more so than their White peers did. Further, Ainsworth- Darnell & Downey (1998) claimed to have seen a positive correlation between being Black and being a good student, meaning Black students are not treated negatively by their peers when they are academically successful. The authors believed the problem of Black underachievement was due to lack of material resources, racial segregation, and negative teacher perceptions of Black students. Similarly, Ainsworth – Darnell & Downey's (1998) and Adler (1997) views were in sync with those of Norman, Crunk, Butler and Pinder (2006), and Coon & Kemmelmeier (2001) who believed that Black students, particularly, African Americans have 'retreated' and 'disengaged from the wider culture' in order to maintain a sense of 'collective identity,' 'safety,' and 'solidarity.' Norman et al. (2006), like Ainsworth – Darnell & Downey (1998) also held the prevailing viewpoint that if educators hold on to the unwarranted belief that Black adolescents do not value education then this can only hamper Black students, particularly, African American students' academic achievement. So, negative stereotyping, stigmatizing, oppressive history, or

negative perceptions held by teachers toward Black students (African Americans) can only hinder their educational achievement (Norman et al., 2006; Norman et al., 2001; Ainsworth-Darnell & Downey, 1998; Steele & Aronson, 1995; Steele, 1997, 1999; Lundy, 2003).

Carter (2003) proposed a logical question, “If Black students have more pro-school beliefs, why are they lower achievers? Summer & Fisher’s (2005) findings seemed to answer this puzzling paradoxical question, in that, they found that underachievers and high achievers view education as important, but either, relevant to their future goals (as in the case of high achievers), or irrelevant to their ultimate goals / needs (as in the case of underachievers). Similarly, Summer & Fisher’s findings are in line with that of Mickelson’s (1990) theory of abstract and concrete attitudes toward schooling. Mickelson found that students were capable of holding two different views regarding education. Abstractly, students in underachieving and high achieving groups value education as an important tool for success, but on a concrete level, the high achievers see themselves as benefiting from education, whereas, the underachievers do not (but they have alternative pursuits as their targeted goals—such as being a rapper or a professional athlete).

The oppositional – culture theory, like the cultural ecological theory offered to explain the differences in education achievement seen between African Americans, Afro-Caribbean, and African students, offers some thoughts on the educational achievement problem. Oppositional culture theory has been popularized because it focuses on students’ peer groups and oppositional subcultures as reasons for the underachievement of Black Americans compared to other Blacks from elsewhere (Wiggan, 2007). Although, some students may become alienated from school because of the White hegemony and racial exclusion they often face in educational institutions, oppositional – culture theory seems to reinforce the myth that Black students collectively do not value education (Tyson, 2002 as cited by Wiggan, p. 321).

The theory of oppositionality view students as being active agents capable of resisting oppression. Further, proponents of oppositional-culture theory view variances in achievement as differences in voluntary and involuntary minority student status (Wiggan, 2007). Besides the cultural explanation for differences in African heritage students educational achievement, levels of parental involvement is also suggested by the literature as having an influence on African heritage students' achievement levels.

Parental Involvement and Differences in African Heritage Students' Educational Achievement

A second major explanation for differences in education achievement between African American, Afro Caribbean and African students discusses level of parental involvement and its effects on student achievement.

Proponents of the cultural ecological theory postulate that cultural values, attitudes, norms, and traditions present in a student's home environment may influence his or her school value or attitudes towards learning in general. Ogbu (2003) highlighted two community forces that he believed attributed to poor achievement among African Americans. The community forces outlined by Ogbu were: (a) student – centered factors (e.g. low ability, negative peer pressures, and the belief that academic success is ‘acting White’); and (b) lack of parent – centered factors (e.g. lack of parental involvement in their child’s education, low expectation of Black students, high expectations of White students, high expectations of the school system).

Ogbu & Simmons (1998) found that cultural attitudes and values in the home and amongst parents can complement school learning. In a cross – cultural study comparing Chinese, Japanese, and American child – rearing practices, researchers found significant differences in parental support for schooling (Kauchak & Eggen, 2005). More than 95 percent of native

Chinese and Japanese fifth graders had desks at home on which to do their home work; only 63 percent of the Americans sample did (Kauchak & Eggen, 2005). Also, 57 percent of the Chinese and Japanese parents supplemented their fifth graders' school work with additional math workbooks as compared with only 28 percent of the U.S. parents (Kauchak & Eggen, 2005). Finally, 51 percent of the Chinese parents and 29 percent of the Japanese parents supplemented their children's science curriculum with additional work compared with only 1 percent of American parents (Kauchak & Eggen, 2005).

A study attempting to understand the phenomenal successes of Indo-Chinese children in the U.S. classrooms further documents the effects of home cultural values on learning (Caplan, Chey and Whitmore, 1992). In examining the school experiences of Vietnamese and Laotian refugees who had been in the United States for a relatively short time (an average of 3.5 years), the researchers found amazing progress. The Indo-Chinese children received better than a B average in school, and their scores on standardized achievement tests corroborated the grades as reflecting true achievement, and not grade inflation (Kauchak & Eggen, 2005). Researchers such as Caplan, Chey and Whitmore (1992) found that when these students' home life were examined it was found that their parents placed heavy emphasis on the importance of education, hard work, autonomy, perseverance, and pride. Further, these values were reinforced with a nightly ritual of family home work in which both parents and older siblings helped younger members of the family (Caplan, Chey, and Whitmore, 1992). But, in American families, particularly, African American families, it was found that parents play a lesser role in students' school work (Kauchak & Eggen, 2005; Ogbu, 2003).

According to O'Bryan (2006), research literature indicates that parental involvement has several positive effects, such as: positive students' attitudes toward school, improved home work habits, reduced absenteeism, and enhanced academic achievement.

Although, the literature reveals that African American parents are involved to some extent in their children's education, the literature also suggests that White American parents are more involved than African American parents are (O'Bryan, 2006).

Parental involvement falls into two distinct categories, school –based involvement and home-based involvement (Pomerantz, Moorman, and Litwack, 2007). School – based involvement occurs when parents make actual contact with their children's schools by being present at general school meetings, talking with teachers, attending school events, and volunteering at their children's schools (Pomerantz, Moorman & Litwack, 2007, p. 374). Home – based involvement, on the other hand, occurs when parents take active practices at home to help their children, such as, assisting children with home work or course selection, and talking with children about academic issues (Pomerantz, Moorman, & Litwack, 2007, p. 375). Hoge, Smit, and Crist (1997, as cited by Jeunes, p. 205) define parental involvement as consisting of four components: parental expectations, parental interest, parental involvement in school, and family community.

Jeunes (2003) conducted a meta analytical study on the "Effects of parental involvement on minority children's academic achievement." In this study, Jeunes (2003) searched major databases (i.e. Psych Info, ERIC, Sociological Abstracts, Wilson Periodicals, etc) to find studies that examined the effects of parental involvement on the academic achievement of K-12 children, and also, he looked for journal articles on parental involvement with minority students. In all, he utilized 26 studies, of which 20 studies were used in his meta analysis. In Jeunes'

research, a statistical analysis was conducted to determine the overall effects of parental involvement for each of the 20 studies, as well as specific components of parental involvement. Specific components included: the extent to which parents communicated with their children about school, parents checking on their children's home work, parental expectations of the academic success of their children, and parents' encouragement. Six different racial groupings were examined: those studies with (a) mostly African American participants; (b) all African American participants; (c) mostly Asian American participants; (d) all Asian American participants; (e) mostly Latino and Asian American participants; (f) all Latino and Asian American participants. Also, four different measures of academic achievement were used to assess the effects of parental involvement on academic achievement (Jeynes, 2003, p. 206). Results of Jeynes' (2003) meta analysis revealed that parental involvement does have an affect on minority students' academic achievement. In fact, for the mostly African Americans and 100% African Americans, the effect sizes were statistically significant at .44 ($p < .01$) and .48 ($p < .01$) respectively. For the Latinos and Asians, the effect sizes were also significant, but not as significant as that seen for African Americans [as the effect size for Latinos was .43 ($p < .05$) and for Asians it was .48 ($p < .05$)] (Jeynes, 2003, p. 207). Further, the effect sizes for parental involvement were more than four tenths of a standard deviation for studies that had either mostly or all African American participants; whereas, those studies that used most or all Asian American students as participants yielded smaller effect sizes (Jeynes, 2003, p. 213). Moreover, the meta analysis study revealed that parental involvement benefited African Americans more than it did Asian Americans or Latino Americans.

Conversely, one may argue that when African American parents are uninvolved in their children's school work, their academic achievement suffers. In a meta – analytical study

conducted by Lee and Bowen (2006) that looked at parental involvement, cultural capital and the achievement gap among elementary school children, they found that ethnicity was associated with parents' involvement. European American parents were found to be frequently involved at school than African American and Latino parents. Consequently, teachers reported significantly higher academic achievement amongst Euro - American students than among Latinos and African Americans (Lee & Bowen, 2006, p. 204). It therefore, can be deduced that when African American parents are involved in their children's school life, their academic performances is enhanced, but when they are not involved, the students' underachieve relative to other dominant and non- dominant groups (Jeynes, 2003; Lee & Bowen, 2006; Fang, 2006).

However, there are researchers such as Fang (2006) and Ogbu (2003) who believe that parental beliefs and not parental involvement greatly affects African American students' performances. Fang (2006) states:

“.... the most consistent and powerful predictors of academic achievement in elementary school were parental beliefs of their children's school performance and general abilities, and parent expectations of children's highest educational attainment” (p. 7).

Similarly, Halle, Kurtz – Cortes and Mahoney (1997, as cited by Fang, p. 7) also concluded based on their study of 41 elementary students that ‘parental beliefs were more strongly linked with child outcomes than were parents’ achievement –oriented behaviors’ (p. 7). Also, Ogbu (2003) stated accordingly:

Minority students form their image, or social construction of the connection or lack of it between school success and success in adult life from the beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors of people in their community (p. 71).

Summary of the Literature

The educational achievement differences of Blacks of diverse ethnicities (i.e. Afro Caribbean, Africans & African Americans) can be linked to the influences of cultural factors and levels of parental involvement. .

The theory of cultural differences and / or social class do not effectively take into account that in order for some poor Blacks to move up in social standing or experience social mobility, and achieve academic success, firstly, there have to be available resources for them by way of the dominant cultural capital which would allow them to move up socially and ultimately acquire academic success. If some Blacks are denied dominant-cultural capital resources, then they may resort to utilization of the non-dominant cultural capital resources and may thus never experience social mobility and academic success within the dominant society.

Moreover, according to Wiggan (2007), unlike the theories of social class and cultural differences (cultural-ecological model offered to explain cultural differences between Blacks), the oppositional – culture framework addresses agency and change, in that; it argues that Black students respond to an oppressive social and economic system by forming an oppositional identity. This theory argues that African Americans underachieve academically because the educational system is viewed by them as an extension of White culture, which threatens Black social identity (Wiggan, 2007). Oppositional theory does offer exciting perspectives for most education researchers, but the overarching problem with the theory is that it blames Black students for their underachievement and for problems inherent in the American educational system. For example, Ogbu (2003) in his Shaker High ethnographic research study focused only on Black American students as the source of their underachievement, he failed to interview teachers and White students to get a more total picture of the problem associated with the Black

students' underachievement. Ogbu interviewed Black American students and ignored the 'system's' influences that significantly contribute to the students' poor academic performances and poor attitudes toward school. This seemed to present not only a one sided argument, but a contradictory argument as well. For one can argue that Black American students are victims of 'the system' who are just living out or acting out prevalent stereotypes that are a part of the 'system' (i.e. society & racist institutions).

Most of the parental involvement literature, like the literatures on the oppositional theory argument which blames Black American students for their underachievement, also blames Black American parents' low levels of participation in their children's schooling for their children's resulting underachievement compared to other minorities (mainly voluntary immigrants) (Lee & Bowen, 2006; Fang, 2006).

A Third Explanation: How Black Students Are Situated on Bank's Typology of Ethnic Identity Continuum

The two explanations mentioned earlier all seems to effectively explain the school performance differences for students of African descent. However, a third explanation for low student achievement may relate to Blacks ethnic identity, basically, how does the establishment of one's ethnic identity or 'true ethnic self' correlates with an individual's mastering of two dissimilar cultures, or un-mastering of two dissimilar cultures, be they European and African cultures or otherwise. To this end, Bank's Typology of Ethnic Identity continuum scale can be utilized in order to assess if one is at an ethnic identity stage that would entail them being able to successfully function in two dissimilar cultures, which may also enable them to gain upward social mobility and achieve academic success. Bank's model involves six stages: ethnic psychological captivity, ethnic encapsulation, ethnic identity clarification, bi-ethnicity, multi-

ethnicity and reflective nationalism, globalism and global competency (McAllister & Irvine, 2000). Stage 1 –*ethnic psychological captivity*-focuses on the socio-historical reflection of individuals, so members of a marginalized group may internalize negative racial and ethnic stereotypes and beliefs and may academically underachieve as a result (McAllister & Irvine, 2000; Steele & Aronson, 1995; Steele, 1997, 1999). At stage 2 –*ethnic encapsulation*, the members of the dominant culture in turn internalizes the myth about the inferiority of the marginalized group, while the marginalized group becomes isolated as a group, pulling away from association with anything to do with the dominant culture ideologies (McAllister & Irvine, 2000). So, cultural opposition of some marginalized groups may result. McAllister & Irvine (2000) further outlined the other stages as follows: stage 3 – *ethnic identity clarification* – involves self acceptance of one's race and identifying positively with acceptance of others different from oneself. Stage 4 – *bi-ethnicity*, stage 5 – *multi-ethnicity* and stage 6 – *global competency*, represents the highest stages on Bank's ethnic identity continuum. Presence at stages 4, 5 and 6 means that an individual have reached the ethnic maturity identity level to be able to master two dissimilar cultures which can translate into upward social mobility, academic success, and global competitiveness.

However, if Black students are stucked at Ethnic identity levels 1 and 2, he or she may under perform academically and build up oppositionality to the Eurocentric school system because of the internalized racial and ethnic stereotypes they have acquired through years of schooling in the dominant culture. Black students who are at Ethnic identity levels 4 and above may do well academically, reject racist views held of them, and be able to master both elements of their African culture and elements of the dominant European culture.

Towards employing more culturally sensitive curriculums in K-12 schools

Creation of more culturally sensitive curriculums (esp. in science) that can merge students' lived cultural experiences and ways of learning with that of traditional western learning is seen as crucially important for urban K-12 schools.

"Schools do not just act on their students, but students act also on their schools through their individualistic, and collective cultural lifestyles brought into the school system" (Fuller & Clarke, 1994; Buxton, 2004, p.1). Therefore, urban k-12 teachers should not view students' lived cultural experiences as deficiencies that may hamper their (science) knowledge acquisition (Aikenhead, 2000), but rather, teachers should welcome and try to build upon students' lived cultural experiences (Kauchak & Eggen, 2005). Therefore, through interactions and dialogic intercourses between students of varied cultural backgrounds (African Americans, Native Indians, etc), and parents and teachers working together in partnerships, this all can help to bring about a broadened (science) curriculum which can combine both indigenous knowledge for Native people, personal life experiences for African Americans and Hispanics, and western traditional knowledge. This can be done in order to make for a more rounded curriculum in science, social science, or otherwise, and in order to improve all students' (Native people, Mexicans, African Americans & others) understanding of their school subjects, but by way of merging their real world lived life learning with western traditional learning, rather than forcing western learning or ways of learning on them (Buxton, 2004; Wang & Lin, 2005). In the same way that merging western knowledge with students' lived world experiences is seen as a great benefit in improving science understanding for all students, mathematics and reading knowledge has been predicted to improve also when teachers combine traditional mathematics learning with students' ways of understanding mathematics concepts, which is found to be steeply grounded

and influenced by their cultural way of life. Negative impacts on some students' academic performance can result when there is a departure or disconnect between the newly exposed traditional knowledge (or traditional ways of teaching & traditional learning) and students' cultural way of learning, particularly, for some students migrating from one country to another country. For example, Wang & Lin (2005) conducted a study that compared the math performances of mainland Chinese students, newly immigrated Chinese students to America, and Chinese Americans and found that Chinese students in China did better in math than Chinese immigrants newly immigrated to America and Chinese Americans. It was also discovered that math performances seemed to correlate with students' retention or loss of their initial Chinese culture; so researchers found that as Chinese Americans and newly immigrated Chinese students became 'acculturated' (i.e. lost their initial Chinese culture) and 'assimilated' into the American school system, their math performances fell drastically as compared to their performances before coming to America. So they did poorly in comparison to the students still residing in China, although they still did better than American students. In many instances, students undergo "cultural border crossing" in order to move from their life –world or lived world experiences (ex. Native Indians) into the world of western modern learning, as is prevalent in American k-12 urban classrooms (Aikenhead, 2000, 1996; Snively & Corsiglia, 2000). So to accommodate and adopt western learning, students of varied cultural backgrounds that presents learning, particularly, science learning differently from the traditional western science way often has to reject their social and cultural way of knowing and meaning making in order to accommodate western traditional way of knowing and meaning making. In some instances, students can successfully reject their cultural way of knowing or learning and can successfully accommodate the ways of learning science which is common to western traditional science learning; whereas,

others may have a problem in doing so, and as a result their science performances may be greatly affected. So, rather than pigeonholing students into categories and teaching to the students' traits or attempting to replace those traits, the emphasis should be placed on helping students develop dexterity in using both the familiar, and new approaches of learning (Aikenhead, 2000, 1996; Snively & Corsiglia, 2000).

Strategies for Voluntary Minorities in Schools

To avoid pigeonholing students and stereotyping students from different cultures, teachers and interventionists should learn about their students' unique cultural backgrounds and use this knowledge to organize their classrooms and programs, in order to help students learn what they teach to them, to foster better peer relationships, and to communicate more with parents. Teachers and interventionists can learn about students' cultures through (a) observation of children's behavior in the classroom and on the playgrounds, (b) asking students questions about their cultural practices and preferences, (c) talking to parents about their cultural practices and preferences, (d) doing research on various ethnic groups with children in schools, and (e) studying published research works on children's groups (Bolima, 2006; Ogbu, 1992; Bempechat & Severson, 1999).

Strategies for Involuntary Minorities in schools

Teachers and interventionists should: (a) study the histories and cultural adaptations of the involuntary minorities in order to understand the basis of the group's cultural and language reference frame as well as social identity, (b) establishment of special counseling and related programs to help involuntary minorities learn to separate attitudes and behavior in order to enhance school success, and to help students to avoid interpreting the Euro-centric school system as a 'threat to their social identity and sense of security,' (c) establishment of more programs to

increase involuntary minority students' adoption of 'accommodation without assimilation' or 'playing the classroom game,' in order to do well academically (Ogbu, 1992).

Like Wang's (2004) and Yang & Cobb's (1995) descriptions of mathematics learning, a similar description of science may also be rendered; that is, science learning may be viewed as a 'culturally scripted activity whose outcomes may be a function of interrelated factors and environments.' For example, some factors may be nationally situated, such as, teachers knowledge, formal teaching practice, and curriculum standards as seen in the USA; others, may be cultural and grounded upon students' personal and lived experiences in their home environments (Wang & Lin, 2005). Therefore, certain families or larger communities may instill in the school age child under their control various 'educational strategies to be used or not used in seeking an education' (Sfard & Prusak, 2005; Ogbu, 1992). This may be the case for many different groups of minorities, such as African Americans, Mexicans, and Native / Indigenous people who may bring their educational learning strategies into the urban science classes and as a result they may either out rightly reject the science knowledge imparted to them or reject traditional or standardized science. So the traditional western science knowledge may be rejected in favor of the students' alternative lived science knowledge taught by their community elders, as in the case of native Indian children.

Conclusion and Implications for Schools

Cultural differences and parental involvement have been put forward to explain differences in African heritage students' educational achievement levels. Additionally, there is the expressed need for more culturally sensitive curriculums to be employed in K-12 classrooms in order that all ethnically diverse learners can benefit. Therefore, rather than employing a 'one curriculum fits all' approach in teaching, teachers and administrators need to realize that in order

for ethnically diverse students to do well, the standard curriculum has to be revamped to be more inclusive.

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